drowning out the morning birds

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/84428831.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/M
Fandoms:	Project Hail Mary (2026), Project Hail Mary - Andy Weir
Relationship:	Ryland Grace/Eva Stratt
Characters:	Ryland Grace, Eva Stratt
Additional Tags:	when i'm in a fumbling weird person challenge and these two are my competition, in reality the closest they got to any form of intimacy was karaoke, but lets just pretend for a moment shall we, this is a story about being hot for your coworker in an ultimately doomed way, and not a story about accurate science, as i am stupid, shit gets real in the canon sense or whatever
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-05-07 Words: 22,915 Chapters: 1/1

drowning out the morning birds

by depressedbarbie

Summary

they try to block everything else out. a lot of it finds them anyway.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

washington dc, united states

Like most times he finds himself in a strange city on this long and winding project, Grace has very little idea what he's doing here.

At a certain point a few months ago, he stopped asking questions on these field trips, just assumed the same sort of sequence would reveal itself eventually: they get on a plane at a moment's notice, they meet with some faceless government people, Stratt does most of the talking but insists on his presence for the optics. And then they go back to the ship, with a new team suddenly unlocked and on board to solve an unsolvable, unthinkable problem. Rinse, repeat.

So he's done this before, yes, and he's sure there is a stack of documents somewhere explaining the specifics of this particular excursion, but that would require him catching up on his emails. He had sort of just assumed that tomorrow, upon waking up in the cool air of a fall morning in DC, they would meet in the lobby and get into a Suburban and go to a bunch of meetings until someone told him the day was over.

What is currently feeling confusing, as he enters his hotel room, is the tux hanging in the closet, and a note that says *Reminder, 7pm pick up downstairs* pinned to the garment bag.

"Oh, absolutely not," he says out loud, to nobody. He dumps his backpack on the floor, turns on his heel, and swipes a pack of candy from the minibar on his way to Stratt's room down the hall. Gummy bears, which will do. He has a handful of them to steel himself, before knocking at her door.

No answer. He waits a beat, then knocks again, more insistent this time.

"Stratt," he calls, presses his ear up to the door to check if she's in there, knocks again, "what is going–"

He is interrupted by something that should not be a surprise, which is the door swinging open. He half-falls into her room, and she stands there, looking at him, vaguely unimpressed.

"You shouldn't be so loud in a public hallway," she says, "anyway. Hello."

He blinks, gets his bearings. She's standing in an almost comically large and fluffy hotel robe, tied tight around her waist. She looks good - better than that, actually; she always looks good, this is something new. Her hair is pulled back, make up done. He blinks it away, tries to focus: the tux, the dress hanging behind her, all of this. He narrows his eyes. She returns a wholly neutral expression, waiting for him to talk.

She really does look good.

"Uh, hi," he says, eloquently.

She looks at him expectantly. "Do you need something?"

“Yeah,” he says, “what’s with the tux?”

She narrows her eyes slightly, like maybe it’s a prank.

“We have the congressional dinner tonight,” she says like he’s a little stupid; a tone familiar to him, at this point, “you know that.”

“I did not know there was a dinner,” he says, “you specifically said we were coming to DC for meetings.”

“I–there’s always a dinner,” she says slowly, “it’s in the briefing notes and in the dailies. You should read them, you’d be less...” she gestures vaguely at him, sort of lost for words, “...like this, about everything, all the time."

He notices her glancing, somewhat disapprovingly, at the pack of gummy bears he’s holding. Which, actually, he’d forgotten about. He eats a few more.

“I don’t want to go to a dinner,” he says, offering her the packet wordlessly. She declines with a look. “What am I even gonna do there? They don’t want to talk about science at dinner.”

She shrugs. “Sure they do. Or you can talk about something else,” she says.

“I don’t get why you can’t just go,” he says. He can hear the annoying whine in his own voice, but doesn’t care. “Seriously, it’s not gonna go well. Please don’t make me do this. I’m bad at small talk.”

“Not really. You’re good, actually, at talking a lot.”

“That’s different,” he says, “that’s quantity, not quality. Not the good kind of talking, you know that.”

She shrugs again, unfazed by him, maybe slightly amused.

“People like you,” is all she says, “we need people to like us.”

He blinks. It’s not what he expected her to say.

“What? You don’t need me for that. Wrong guy for the job. People…people like you, too,” he says, not entirely sure if that’s true.

He likes her, sure. Wonders if that’s the same thing.

She waves him off. “Not Americans,” she says, as though this is a fact.

“I mean. I’m American,” he says, vaguely affronted.

She looks at him, smiles. He realizes the implication of what he’s just said. She is so in his head, sometimes, all the time; it does, actually, make him a bit stupid.

“You’re an academic,” she says, gentler, “it’s different.”

Funny, how it was once a long time since someone had called him an academic, a scientist. Now people say it constantly, an inarguable fact once more. It had taken some getting used to; is still something he notices.

She turns from him, starts digging through her bag, looking for something as though the conversation is over.

“Okay, look, whatever. Even if so – these people don’t just want to hang out with a random guy. They’re, you know,” he gestures vaguely, “wheeling and dealing. I don’t wheel and deal. You do that.”

She turns from where she’s found what she’s been looking for, a pair of earrings she places on the side table, and looks back at him.

“A random guy?” she echoes.

He looks at her, shrugs. Shakes the rest of the gummy bears directly into his mouth.

“I mean, yeah,” he says, mouth full.

She looks at him strangely. Just watches him for a moment as he chews and stares at her expectantly. Something sort of soft on her face, something sort of completely bemused.

“Grace. You’re the chief American scientist on the most consequential international space program in history.”

He nearly chokes on the last of the candy.

“There is no way that’s my title,” he says.

She throws her hands up, says something in German, which is rare, and how he knows when she’s truly annoyed.

“My god,” she says after a moment, in English this time, eyes closed and fingers at her temples for a moment, before she looks up, “yes. How did you miss that?”

“I–I don’t know!” he says, “there are hundreds of scientists! Not like there’s an org chart, exactly.”

“We don’t do formal roles,” she says, “you know this.”

“I know, I know, one team,” he says quickly, can’t handle another lecture on cross-functional egalitarianism.

“I mean, who else would it possibly be?” she mutters, half to him and half to herself, a state of disbelief.

“I honestly don’t even think I knew it was an option,” he says weakly, and she sighs, walks over to him. She takes him by the shoulders and steers him backwards to the door. This conversation seems to be ending.

“Okay. You have to leave now, and go and get dressed,” she says, and he knows that overtly placating tone, because it’s how he used to talk to twelve year olds all day, “you are going to put on a suit, and you are going to talk for three to four hours about…American football, or something. You have thirty minutes until we go. Come on.”

He looks at her. Raises an eyebrow, smiles. She is so strange, sometimes.

“American football? You think the big, dumb Americans only know how to talk about–”

She shakes her head. “–Grace, I swear–”

He realizes resistance is futile, so raises his hands in defeat.

“–Okay, okay, fine. But you owe me one,” he says, and she rolls her eyes, opens the door behind him and grabs the few small bags of candy sitting on her minibar, pushes them into his hands as he goes.

“I do not owe you one. But there you go. Even,” she says, and shuts the door in his face.

Despite losing emphatically on this one, he smiles on his way back to his room. Sometimes you have to accept your fate.

He eats a Twizzler and does what he’s told.

The night is fine, really, by the standards of these things. He sits next to a Californian senator and some miscellaneous staffers, and does, actually, talk a lot about the 49ers. And then the Giants, and then Golden State, and when Stratt catches his eye over the table and hears his rudimentary but entirely passable sports radio impression, she smiles at him, a loud and clear *I told you so*. He rolls his eyes before smiling back, raising his glass in defeat.

Two drinks in, the night mostly fine but dragging, he finds himself looking over at her more often. She looks beautiful. He tries not to notice, but it’s hard. Effortless; black dress, to the floor, simple, but she looks beautiful. He looks at her for a long moment, during a labored toast from a congressman that he can’t be bothered to pay attention to; thinks about how strange it is that a year ago, they didn’t know each other. And now here they are, some sort of strange partnership forged almost without words: a woman whose hotel room he feels perfectly comfortable crashing into to argue about their joint plans; a woman who knows he responds well to being told he’s well liked, knows he is placatable with candy; the most extraordinarily competent person in the world who, for some reason, likes having him around. Who fidgets with her glass at things like this, and who looks the tiniest bit relieved when he’s by her side.

She sits across the table from him and he really can’t stop looking at her, a revelation of sorts. Suddenly, as though she can feel his gaze; hear his thoughts, she looks up. She catches his eye, tips her head in silent question. He looks away, at the floor, and feels a flush creep up his face. Hopes she’s turned away by the time he has to look back up and join in the toast.

He does his job well: says a lot of hellos, shakes a lot of hands, gets the people around him three glasses deep, and answers their questions in an accessible and sort of hopeful way.

Aside from the staring, the night passes, if a little slowly, without incident.

When she finally - finally - gives him the nod after coffee has been served, he says a round of goodbyes and dutifully promises to make himself available for any questions, and then they slip out into the mercifully cool fall air.

“Well,” he says, letting the door close behind them, “we did it.”

She nods. “We did it. See, not so bad, right?”

He shrugs. “Sure. But you can’t tell me you enjoy those things,” he says, and she smiles in return.

“No,” she says, “but they serve a purpose.”

She pulls a pack of cigarettes out of her purse, a lighter. He is surprised, can’t think if he’s ever seen her smoke before.

“Want one?” she asks, and he shakes his head.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” he says.

She waves him off, lights up and closes her eyes as she breathes in.

“Only on land,” she says, by way of explanation, and he laughs, “anyway, you want to walk back? I need some air.”

“Sure,” he says, gesturing at her shoes, “it’s like, ten blocks, though. You going to be okay?”

She looks at him, vaguely amused, and starts walking.

It’s only about twenty minutes back, but it’s funny how it feels so luxurious to stroll through the quiet of a Tuesday evening, without anything pressing awaiting them at the end. They walk past a street sign to Georgetown and he tells her about the semester he spent there, pent up in a hideous lab with a microbiologist who eventually became part of the cabal calling for his head, and if his imitation of him has the southern drawl painted on a bit thick, it’s nonetheless effective in getting what he wants, which is for her to laugh. She shivers slightly next to him as they walk, and he offers her his jacket, which after a moment of consideration she takes, draping it over her bare shoulders, arms crossed beneath it after she finishes her cigarette. She tells him a story of home in return; a professor at her university in Berlin who had once made her stand up and recite a poem entirely in Russian as punishment for laughing during his class, and it strikes him how rare this is, for them to talk about before. How coming home - or close enough to it, familiar beats of an American city - has brought him; them; something new.

“I like it here. I haven’t walked through a city in so long,” she muses, as though reading his mind, and it feels a lot like something shared.

They walk through the lobby and into the elevator together, and suddenly it’s quiet. They’ve spent a hundred strange events in the same room, a hundred late nights working together, but

there's something here, in the in between, that is unfamiliar.

They reach the ninth floor and both step out, and when they make it to her door, she turns to him. He stops there, follows her lead.

"You did well, tonight," she says, looking at the floor before looking back up at him, "thank you."

"Sorry I was a dick about it," he says, "I'll, uh. Read the dailies, you know."

"No you won't," she says, "it's okay."

He laughs. "Okay," he says, "well. I'll become a better sports analyst for us, at least."

She hums a laugh. They stand quietly for a beat, a little tension between them he can't ignore. She looks up at him, and he smiles at her without thinking.

"We should go to bed," she says quietly, "early morning."

"Yeah," he says. Wants to stay in this moment, with her, so badly suddenly he can feel it in his blood.

"Here," she says, taking off his jacket, "thank you. I don't know why they always send a summer dress."

"It's nice," he says, without thinking, then catches himself, looks at her with wide eyes, "I mean. Objectively. Professionally. Am I allowed to say that?" He winces a little, can feel himself stumbling over it in real time.

"No, you're not," she says, a little look of surprise, a little amusement, but maybe also a little pleased, "but thank you."

He laughs. "Okay. Well. Goodnight," he says.

She smiles as she keys into her room.

"Goodnight," she says, and maybe he imagines it, or maybe she's the smallest bit flushed as she closes the door.

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shanghai, china

The first time she watches him teach - properly, up close - is in Shanghai, of all places.

They had arrived a day earlier; the two of them and a handful of the Chinese science delegation, touching down at an airbase in the arresting July heat. The air is so heavy here, thick with humidity, and while the rest of the team had taken the opportunity to see friends and take a rare Sunday night off, she and Grace found themselves in a restaurant round the corner, eating thick ribbons of hand pulled noodles under ice cold air conditioning. It's his

first time in China, her hundredth; she takes charge of the menu and orders in perfect Mandarin and waves him off when he asks her if there's any language she doesn't speak.

They spend most of the dinner in some sort of impromptu Chinese class, where he asks her to teach him how to pronounce everything on the menu. His tones are terrible and his accent makes her laugh but his curiosity is eternally alight, and it's not the first time she has had to reckon with how much she likes that about him.

She has known since she met him, of course, that he is a teacher, and has known for some time that he is a good one. Not just from his fellow biologists, but from MDs, physicists, astronauts, even one of the assistants who's taken an interest in the work they do: they all report back the same surround sound high praise. That he's the only one of the lead team who is patient, who answers questions they feel stupid asking, who takes the time to explain everything he knows and follows up if they've come to him with something that requires more research.

But it's not until Shanghai that she actually sits in on one of his labs. It's not that she's uninterested, she just doesn't have time for hours in the details. He – and many others – give her the toplines; she reads the rest late at night when her own day is done. She's come here to take meetings, and brought him with her to parallel a few sessions with the Chinese fuel specialist team, at the request of someone she owes a favor to. And then, as they are wont to do, schedules fall apart last minute, her meetings slide to later in the week, and she suddenly finds herself with a clear-calendared Monday.

So what the hell, she thinks, and reroutes her driver away from her meeting downtown to the campus on the outskirts of the city where he's teaching today.

She has other things she could do, of course. But she's curious, and wants to do something different, and if someone was to really, really press her, she might admit to just liking, sometimes, being in his presence.

She tries to slip in the back of the lab unnoticed, which is of course a fool's errand: it's a quiet and highly secure room of just seven students (though *students* is probably the wrong word, they are all leaders in their fields), and when she opens the door quietly, she sees them all sort of jump at the interruption.

Most of all Grace, who looks like he's seen a ghost.

"Oh," he says, blinks at her for a moment, "hi?"

"Hi," she says back.

"Everything, uh, okay?" he asks.

When she'd peered in before opening the door, he'd been leaning on his elbows on the edge of one of the lab tables, one hand in his hair, the other pointing at a student he'd asked a question to. Now, he's up straight and alert, looks at her with a small frown over his glasses.

"Sure, yes," she says, "don't let me interrupt."

“Okay,” he says slowly, “I mean. Don’t get me wrong, we’re happy to have you. Right, guys?”

The class murmurs their agreement. She smiles, briefly, at the way she can tell they’re all already sort of enraptured by him. It’s not the first time she’s seen it happen in the matter of a day or two.

“But, uh,” he continues, “anything specific bringing you in?”

“No,” she says, “really, just a quiet day. Wanted to watch and learn.”

“A quiet day,” he repeats, eyes narrowing, “okay. Well, everyone, meet Eva Stratt, our esteemed chair.”

Everyone claps politely, she stares at him, hard, in disapproval for the illustrious introduction. He grins in response, self satisfied and annoying, and looks at the floor for a moment.

“I’m not here,” she says, sits down next to one of the others and shakes his hand, briefly, “go on, Dr. Grace.”

“Okay,” he says, claps his hands and resets, “okay, great. As we were discussing, propulsion. Everyone come round to the scope, one by one, take a look at the slides from earlier. What do you see?”

One by one, the students line up, confer in Mandarin with each other before starting to present their observations to Grace in English. But he holds his hand up, pauses them for a moment.

“Wait, wait, wait. Guys, I think we have a student who hasn’t come to look at the slides,” he says, a faux questioning lilt to his voice, before turning back to look at her.

It takes a moment – Grace and seven students blinking at her expectantly – before it clicks.

“Me?” she says, pointing at herself in surprise, and he smiles, nods. “No, I’m okay. I’ve seen them before.”

There is a sort of vague smirk on his face that tells her she won’t get away with that.

“Hey, you’re in my lab, now,” he says, “my rules. 100% participation, right everyone?”

The students laugh and nod behind him, and he just raises his eyebrows, shrugs as if to say *the council has spoken*.

“Okay, okay,” she says, humors him and walks over, and looks into the microscope at the cells she’s seen every day for two years.

She’s seen hundreds, thousands, of scientific images just like this one over the course of the project. She can count on one hand the number of times she’s actually looked at a cluster of astrophage up close herself. It’s different, even though it shouldn’t be. She looks for longer than she probably needs to.

“Alright,” Grace says, starting her, “thank you, everyone. Let’s discuss. Who wants to go first?”

They spend the next two hours discussing the microbiological movements of astrophage. She mostly just observes everyone else as they watch him religiously, hang off his every word, laugh at his every terrible joke. She finds herself laughing occasionally too, engaged in what he’s doing, how he’s doing it. It’s fun, but he’s also all focus, and by the middle of the day she is admittedly impressed by how much knowledge he’s imparted in a very short amount of time, without it really feeling like work at all.

When they break for lunch, everyone else files out. She can tell he wants to talk, so she stays; the door swinging shut behind the last of the scientists.

“Okay, so is this like, a performance review, or something?” he asks, classroom confidence replaced with an immediate sort of concern, “did something happen? Did someone say something? Because I swear, I do actually know how to do this.”

She smiles. He is so perplexing in his self doubt.

“No,” she says, “why would you think that?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugs, “you don’t make a habit of sitting in on my labs. You know. With the world saving to be done, and everything.”

“You don’t believe that I had a quiet day?”

“What possible reason would I have to believe that?” he asks. Which, fair.

“It’s true,” she says, “look.”

She shows him her calendar on her phone. He raises his eyebrows in surprise.

“That’s the biggest scientific miracle in this lab,” he says, and she laughs, then, “you’re really gonna stay here all day?”

“Yes, why not. Unless you don’t want me to.”

She hopes that doesn’t come off pathetic.

“No, please do,” he says, “I’m just gonna need lunch to work on some new material, you know. Didn’t think I’d be doing this for someone who’s seen me every day for a couple years, was going to recycle some of the greatest hits.”

She tries not to give him the satisfaction of laughing at his jokes more than half the time, but whatever, he’s funny. She laughs again. He looks pleased. So it goes.

The afternoon passes much the same way: he teaches a room of the world’s smartest people about something they could not in their wildest dreams conceive of learning, he makes it surmountable and exciting and the good kind of mind blowing, they ask a million questions and write down every answer; repeat. She says very little, but enjoys it very much. When he

finally calls time on a big day well spent, she looks outside and the hot summer sun has started to set; hazy air still blowing hot through the trees.

Grace says goodbye to them all one by one, then turns to where she sits tapping out a quick email.

“Okay, so I like it here, and everything,” he says, “but I’m also starving, and I can’t eat college canteen food for dinner.”

She glances at him, holds up a finger absentmindedly as she finishes up. “Coming, hold on.”

“You wanna just go to the hotel? One of the guys told me the restaurant’s good.”

“Yes. Sure,” she says, hits send, and their shared ride back is implied.

When they return, it’s almost dark, and an hour long wait for a table. She doesn’t feel like making a whole thing of it - he gets all awkward and overly apologetic, anyway, when she pulls strings - so instead they go out to the balcony to the bar, wait it out over a drink. They’ve been sitting all day, so instead of a table they stand by the edge, hands draped over the railing and each nursing a drink; him a beer, her a gin and tonic.

She loves Shanghai from this angle, a city cleaved in two by the rushing river and the rushing decades. Where they are: a relic of another time, sandstone and antiquated and colonial; over the river a whole new thing: the future, jarringly bright, everything new and full of possibility.

“It’s kind of beautiful,” he says next to her, as though reading her mind, “crazy. But beautiful.”

“It is,” she says, and he tilts the neck of his beer to her to clink her glass.

“Cheers,” he says.

“Cheers,” she says quietly.

“So,” he says, “I’m really not getting fired?”

She rolls her eyes. “What can I say to get you to stop asking me that?”

He blinks. “I mean, *you’re not getting fired* would be a good start.”

“You’re not getting fired,” she obliges, and he feigns relief. “You were great,” she says, after a beat, suddenly serious, “you’re really, really good at it. At teaching, I mean.”

He looks at her sort of funny. It takes her a moment to realize he’s maybe touched. She has not often been surrounded by men like him - much less academics, scientists, like him - with their hearts on their sleeve. It’s disconcerting, sometimes, catches her off guard when he’s open like that, everything all over his face for a moment.

He shrugs it off quickly. “Nah. It’s just a bit of patience,” he says, self-effacing, hand absentmindedly at his neck, “a bit of patience and a lot of making an idiot of yourself. The last one I’m okay at, so.”

She looks at him, hard. Wants him to know this. “You know, when we first met, I couldn’t understand it,” she says, “why you were teaching. You are a scientist, a good one. One with big ideas.”

“Yeah, well, that was a lot of the issue,” he says, that small smile that makes her feel flushed.

“You could’ve done so many other things, though, after all that. Made a lot of money. But you chose to be a school teacher.”

He shrugs. “It was the only thing I wanted to do.”

“Why?” she asks, and he pauses, thinks on it a moment, face lit up in pinks and greens and blues from across the water.

“You actually want to know?” he asks, turning to her properly.

“Sure,” she says.

“There were a lot of things I was bad at, as a kid,” he says, “I wasn’t good at school.”

“I don’t believe that,” she says, surprised, “you have two PhDs.”

“True,” he laughs, “but before that, I was…I don’t know. Uninspired, maybe. Didn’t get why I should care. Then I had an amazing middle school science teacher. She taught us what the parts of a cell were using some crazy Pacman analogy I can’t even remember now, but it’s the first time I paid attention in class. I was hooked, kind of. Started paying attention more, working things out. Then I became a science nerd at twelve and never looked back.”

“Wow,” she says, “I didn’t know that. You seem like a kid who was a science nerd at two.”

He laughs again. “Yeah,” he says, “anyway. That’s why. I spent all that time and all those years studying, and I figured I probably had a pretty good idea of how to be a decent teacher.”

“Makes sense. You’re better than decent,” she says, and then, as he smiles into his drink, “do you miss it?”

“What, now?” he says, and then in an answer that maybe surprises her at how quickly it comes, “of course, yeah. I miss it a lot, actually.”

She nods into the beat of silence, and he looks at her, then winces. “I mean, not that this isn’t, you know. Where I want to be. And it’s so exciting, and groundbreaking, and–”

“Grace,” she laughs, “I’m not offended.”

“Okay, good,” he says, relieved, “because I mean it, this is, you know. Life’s work stuff, truly. But I miss the kids. I think about them a lot. I feel really sad for them, a lot. We’re old, you know, we’ve had good lives. We will have had good lives, by the time…you know. But for them…”

He trails off, and she nods. They’ve never spoken about it in so many words.

“Yes,” she says, “yes, I know.”

They stand there in silence for a moment. She feels the heat of the humid breeze through her hair as they look out over the water. She turns to him, looks at him in profile for a beat. He looks good here in the twilight, shirt rolled halfway up as he rests on his forearms, brow slightly furrowed, light catching his nose. He always looks good deep in thought. It’s something she’s grown to notice.

“Well,” he says, turning back to her, catches her eye with a small smile, “good thing we’re gonna make it all better.”

She laughs, clinks their drinks again. “And cheers to that,” she says.

As she lowers her glass, their arms brush slightly, in a way that feels almost inevitable. They settle that way, back on the railing, skin touching. It sends a shiver through her, feeling him so close. They stay like that: she doesn’t move away, even though she should. Neither does he. He must feel it, but he doesn’t move away.

“You cold?” he asks. She wonders if he felt it, the small current in her skin. Doesn’t even think that’s possible, really, but he’s looking at her so deeply, and it feels so warm, suddenly she feels like it might be.

“It’s thirty five degrees,” she says, going for matter of fact, and he huffs a small laugh, almost embarrassed. “Celcius,” she adds for good measure.

“Right,” he says, glancing at her over his glasses, “just thought, y’know. I’d check.”

She can’t help it, looks down at where their arms are still ever so slightly connected. He does too, and before she can think about it too much and break the spell, he grazes his finger over the back of her hand. Strokes it slightly, tentatively, held breath suspended in air.

She knows she should pull away. And maybe it’s the expensive gin or the warm air or the feeling, here, looking over this endless sea of lights, that they are finally anonymous; maybe it’s all of those things, but she doesn’t. She just can’t make herself do it, right now.

She watches him touch her like that, small and private and earth shattering, and trying not to think too hard she returns the gesture, their fingers brushing in sync.

She feels it, when he looks over at her. Her heart beats in new rhythms in her chest. She swallows, hard, and when she turns to look back at him, she’s sure no one’s ever looked at her like that in her life.

“Hello,” she says, small smile. He huffs a laugh, looks down for a moment and then back at her.

She likes, so much, the feeling of being touched by him. Thinks she’s probably liked it for longer than she’d care to admit; a hand on her shoulder, a brush past in a cramped hallway; but she’s never had it like this, intentional and full of gravity.

He is so close, is the thing. This sometimes bumbling, sometimes insecure, sometimes wildly unprofessional teacher she’d picked up from a non-descript high school on one of a thousand gray travel days and never said goodbye to; this man with a sugar addiction and an incomprehensible way of wearing glasses and a joke she always finds amusing – he is so close. The smartest person in any room, the kindest person in any room; the two things she likes about him most - he is the closest she’s felt to another person in years.

It’s such a profound realization that she doesn’t quite know what to do with it.

“Hi,” he says gently, glancing down at their hands, in a way she knows means he sees something in her expression. He looks back up at her all softly, and she readjusts her face into something more normal, curses herself out silently for letting it be so obvious.

And then her phone rings.

Cuts through the air like a shot, and her hand recoils from his with it; instinct. She fishes it out of her coat pocket, looks at him for a long moment, almost apologetic; tries not to make it wistful. He just smiles, sort of faintly amused and a little awkward, and he opens his mouth to maybe say something but she gestures at her phone, still ringing.

“Right, totally,” he says, hand at the back of his neck, she thinks just for something to do, “no, go for it, I’ll uh. Order some food, our table’s probably ready. You feel like dumplings?”

She laughs. She would like nothing more.

“Maybe we call it,” she says softly, hopes the *I would like that, but*, is implied, “goodnight, Grace.”

“Oh. Yeah,” he says, and she feels with a small thrill the look of disappointment that passes across his face, “no, good idea. Goodnight.”

She looks at him for another long moment, then picks her call up on the last ring.

“Stratt,” she says, and walks back over to the door and inside, swallowed up by the sleek black of the restaurant.

The call goes long, an hour or so. It’s the only hour she doesn’t think about him all night.

**

sydney, australia

The time difference is going to be the death of him.

He can take a lack of sleep, he can take a high volume of travel. But something about flying upwards of twenty hours to Australia, his head doing somersaults trying to work out how many hours forward and back they've gone, has officially tipped him over the edge.

He is resolute in his rule to stay awake until nightfall upon arrival in another country, so doesn't even let himself sit down in his hotel room. He decides to walk instead.

It's worth doing. It's afternoon by the time he heads out, a spring day in Sydney, a place he came once years ago for a conference and never saw anything of, other than the inside of a convention center and two airport lounges. He walks through the botanic gardens and around to the opera house and stares out at the harbor, willing his brain to drink in the fresh, crisp air. It's beautiful, the bridge looming over all these people chattering, having a drink, going to the theater. He feels something like relaxation creep through him; familiarity.

Something about it reminds him of home - not the sun or the people or the light, but the salt, he realizes, the salt in the air is the same. Pacific Ocean and all that, he supposes.

He walks until he's tired in his body, and after a turn back up through Hyde Park, lush jacarandas like purple clouds above him, the afternoon gives way to evening, and he supposes he should think about finding something to eat.

Then, right on cue, his phone dings.

PROJECTIONS TEAM REVIEW - REMINDER - ONE HOUR

He comes closer than he has in a while to cursing.

It shouldn't be a surprise: of course a 1200 GMT meeting is at nine in the evening in Sydney, because that's how time works. It is not, it turns out, how his brain feels like working. So be it. He sighs, does a 180, and heads back in the vague direction he thinks the hotel is in.

At least he doesn't have to do it alone.

Need a coffee for this? he texts Stratt fifteen minutes before kick off, then, *All these people talk about is how good the coffee is, figure we should try it.*

She doesn't reply, which is slightly odd. She is the only person glued more tightly to her phone than his students. He waits ten minutes and follows up, a simple *?*.

Nothing.

He waits another five, then dials into the call, pacing his room absentmindedly. The meeting, of course, does not start without her. He makes small talk for a few minutes, messages her again.

When the clock hits twenty past and he's heard nothing, the call now sitting decidedly in muted silence, he decides it's time to see what's going on. Makes a vague excuse for them both and hangs up. He walks out to the balcony, stares out over the water for a moment and decides what to do next, fingers drumming on the railing.

He doesn't actually know what room she's in - they'd arrived here in such a blur he's not even sure he was awake - so he goes downstairs to find one of the friendly local security guys, Dave. They'd bonded in a car ride earlier over a shared enthusiasm for INXS, a local pride point, and while Dave greets his question with a not exactly subtle amount of suggestive eyebrow raising, he gets the job done and gives him the room number.

"I'm only telling you because she told me I could when she sent me away earlier," Dave says, which is something that strikes Grace as odd, "anyway, have fun, mate. Be safe!"

"It's not like that, Dave!" he yells over his shoulder as he runs to catch the elevator, but he doesn't have time to explain, so just leaves him to his smug little Australian grin.

He heads back up to the tenth floor - his phone still decidedly not pinging with a message from her - and steps out to look for 1025. When he rounds the corner to her room, he notices it immediately: her door is ajar. Something inside him grows cold, immediate fear that something has happened to her. He swallows it, walks forward and knocks.

No answer.

"Hello?" he says, knocking at the door again.

Nothing.

"Str–" he starts, then stops, then winces internally at himself. Never knows what to call her, anymore, when it's just them. Feels like one of many confusing things that has crossed some sort of invisible line; maybe since Shanghai, maybe since a hundred other times he's felt a moment between them and wondered if it's just him, going crazy, or something else.

He looks down the hall; all clear. Knocks again.

"Hello?" he says again. Quieter, just in case.

There is no answer. He gives it a few seconds, then makes up his mind. He'll take the reprimand if it comes. He just wants to make sure she's alright.

"Okay, I'm coming in," he says, a little unsure but determined nonetheless, and pushes the door open slowly.

He is relieved, instantly, to see her through the glass door across the room standing out on the balcony, a carbon copy of his own. Feels the adrenaline, the fear, leaching out of his bloodstream in real time. For a moment, she doesn't seem to notice the interruption, and he is so enraptured by her like this; unwatched and unguarded. It's so rare to catch her in a moment of quiet.

He closes the door gently behind him, walks across the room towards her. Slowly, doesn't want to spook her. She seems to be deep in thought, just the edges of her profile visible to him. Her hair catches the street light, and as he nears the door she runs her fingers through it, almost absentmindedly.

He is so taken with her that it's only when she turns her head, starts on seeing him coming out through the door and wipes furiously at her eyes, that he realizes she is crying.

"Jesus Chr–"

"Oh gosh, I didn't–"

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asks, cutting him off all in a rush.

She runs her fingers under her eyes again, rough, tucks her hair behind her ears. Clears her throat and does not look at him for a moment, just crosses her arms around herself and stares at the ground, then back out over the balcony as though steeling herself, then finally back at him. Stares hard, at him.

"I just wanted to check you were okay," he says, a little halting, "I– we had projections, you didn't make it. I thought I'd check if you were okay."

"How–how did you even get in here?" she asks. She seems flustered, not all here. So unlike her.

"The door was open," he says, suddenly wants to go to great pains to let her know he isn't being completely strange, "I knocked, a bunch, I didn't just– whatever. Sorry, I didn't mean to–"

"It's fine," she says, waving him off, "I– whatever. I'm fine."

She looks at him for the first time, her gaze still set stonily. He can tell she's trying to keep herself steady.

"Are you sure?" he asks softly into the cool air, and he knows the answer is no, because that's all it takes for her expression to falter ever so slightly.

She looks at him for a long moment. He wants to close the gap between them, but doesn't want to cross a line she doesn't want him to. So he waits, feels his brow furrow as she looks at him.

"My father is dead," she says quietly, "I just got a call, from a nurse. He died this morning. Berlin morning, I guess. I don't even know where I was."

"Oh, Eva," he says without meaning to. It falls out of him like a prayer.

She waves him off. "It's– he was very old. It's okay. It's just a shock, you know, it's…" she cuts herself off at the first tremor in her voice.

He can't help it anymore, walks over to her. Has to be close to her, seeing her like this.

"It's a huge shock," he says back to her. Puts a hand on her shoulder, tentative, always tentative. "I'm so, so sorry."

She looks up at him, and for a second he thinks she might pull away, but instead her face falls and she nods because she can't speak, and that's all the signal he needs.

He draws her close, closes his eyes as she lets him embrace her, breathes deep. Everything in her is wound tight, her breath hitched, and he knows she's trying not to cry because he can feel it in the set of her shoulders, the way she holds herself. He tries not to move: just holds her there, for as long as she wants. For as long as she needs. Tries not to feel like it's something he's been put on this earth to do.

"Okay," she says, after what could have been forever, lifting her head, "okay, God. Sorry."

"It's okay. I'm so sorry," he says again, looking at her.

She swallows, blinks.

"Thank you."

Awkward, suddenly. He isn't sure that she wants him there. "I can, uh, leave, if you–"

"We should look at the projections," she interrupts. Pulls her hair back from off her face and twists it into a bun; all business, clears her throat again, "do you have them?"

He almost laughs, disbelief, but holds it back. Grief is a strange thing, when it first sinks its claws in. He understands the feeling of wanting control; water through hands.

"We don't have to do that tonight," he says gently, "c'mon, you should take a break. They'll be there tomorrow. I can let you get some rest–"

"No," she says, sharply, then quieter, "no, we should do it."

She looks up at him, eyes uncharacteristically unguarded. She looks small, out here, teeth chattering slightly in the evening chill. She is always so cold, even in a slight breeze.

He thinks he knows what she's asking for. It's not to look at the projections.

"Okay," he says, "okay, let's do it."

He makes a valiant effort to be normal. He only has his phone, but zooms in on the pages of the various pre-reads dutifully, explains them as best he can without having done the actual meeting, which he's not sure she realizes was postponed when she didn't appear. Sometimes he thinks she remains the smallest bit surprised by things like this, as though the whole foundation of the team, the project, doesn't rest on her.

He explains in layman's terms – and honestly, he's more or less a layman here, not exactly the world's most authoritative voice on theoretical physics – the earth's orbital path and latest likely launch window timings based on what they know now; the escape velocity, the beta angles. She nods for a while, but she is unquestioning, something he knows with certainty he has never thought in relation to her, and after a while he stops.

She doesn't seem to notice for a beat, keeps looking at what he's been pointing to on his phone. It's only when he locks it, screen fading to black, that she seems to register that something has changed.

"Maybe we should call it, for a bit," he says.

She looks up at him, blinks herself back into the room quickly, but he sees it.

"Oh. It's late, sorry. I didn't realize. Sure. You can go, if you like."

He considers saying yes. But he thinks he should take the chance.

"You want a tea?" he asks, instead.

Foreign city, anonymous hotel, a crackled phone call from home. It's so lonely, this whole experience, so much of the time. He can't imagine how she felt, alone in this room.

She considers it for a long moment. He can tell she's willing herself to say no. But it seems to hit her in real time, the heaviness of it all. She looks so tired, suddenly. She looks up at him. Something like relief.

She nods, tightly. "Okay," she says, "yes. Thanks. No caffeine, though."

He nods and takes it as permission, kicks his shoes off and busies himself at the kitchenette, kettle on. He opens various cupboards until he finds two mugs and a box of chamomile. It's quiet, not unpleasantly, and he hears it behind him as she gets up from the desk and walks over to the bed, dull thud of the headboard as she sits up against it. Deep sigh.

When he's done, he walks over to her, hands her a mug which she accepts with a smile. He isn't sure, for a moment, where to sit - the desk feels odd, now; the armchair feels a little too therapist - but she rolls her eyes and taps the other side of the bed, so he obliges, settles in next to her.

"So. You want to talk about it?" he asks gingerly, steam winning against his glasses for a moment, which seems to vaguely amuse her.

She sighs, though not annoyed. Just tired, he thinks, as his vision clears. She takes her hair down again, kneads her fingers at her scalp for a moment.

"I don't know," she says, slight shake of her head. Balances her mug between her hands and half-perches it on her knees, pulled up to her chest. "I don't know. Yes. It's just so…"

She doesn't finish that thought.

"What was he like?" he asks.

She swallows, heavy smile playing across her face for a moment. "He was difficult. Really difficult. Which you're not meant to say, the day someone dies, I know. But we weren't close. At all, actually."

“Still, though,” he says.

“Still,” she echoes.

“When did you see him last?” he ventures. Sometimes logistics are a safe jumping off point, with her. She likes absolutes.

“God, I don’t know. Before all of this. He was sick, for a long time,” she says, and an accompanying *crazy* hand gesture is all the back story she gives, “it wasn’t…easy.”

“Yeah,” he says. Can tell she has more to say, so stays quiet otherwise. Gives her the space to do so.

She laughs, a little rueful. “You know, it’s the first time I ever wondered if all of this is worth it,” she says, unsure. And then, resolute: “which it is, by the way. I know that. We never even saw each other, anyway, even when I was home. So it makes no sense. But you know, you leave and you don’t think it will be that long, and then you turn around and all of your family is dead.”

He swallows. “Yeah,” is all he says, pulls at a loose thread in the sheets, “yeah, I get that.”

She looks up quickly, catches his eye. He doesn’t mean to meet her gaze, but it’s too late; sees it there in her stare.

“Oh, Jesus,” she says, realization searing before she closes her eyes, pinches her nose, “fuck, sorry. I didn’t mean–”

“–It’s okay,” he says. Shouldn’t be surprised, that she knows his entire life story - she knows everything about the entire team - but it’s sort of jarring nonetheless. They’ve never really spoken about any of it; about home, before. “It’s okay. It’s…it was a long time ago.”

“Sorry,” she says again, “that was–”

“It’s fine,” he says with a small laugh, because it is. “Death is strange. All your family being dead is really, really strange. Don’t worry. I, uh, I get it.”

She nods, and she looks sort of teary again, so he does the first thing he can think to do, which is to put his mug down, then take hers from her hand and do the same, and pull her in for a hug. She follows his lead, her face in his neck, and he closes his eyes and remembers what it’s like to feel so close, so connected, to another person. Lights up for it in a way he thought he might have forgotten how to.

“Thank you,” she says into his skin, “really.”

She sits back up slowly after a while, blinks at him. She looks so tired. She always looks tired - don’t they all - but he can see it on her face, exhaustion bleeding through her.

“You should get some rest,” he says, tucking her hair behind her ear; instinct. He freezes, momentarily, wonders if that’s a line she will not approve of being crossed, but she turns into his hand almost, eyes closed for a fraction of a second.

“I don’t want to be alone,” she says, so quiet he almost misses it.

It’s such a misconception, he thinks, that she’s unfeeling, that she’s cold. He’s known this since the earliest days on the ship, when one evening two Irish scientists lamented missing St Patrick’s Day weekend back home, and two kegs of Guinness were on deck by Friday evening; little shiny shamrocks on strings over the mess hall doors. She is unrelentingly dedicated to the mission, above all else. She is unfailingly - an occasional evening like this aside, maybe - all about the work. But she has the capacity to be other things, too. He thinks most people miss that about her, prefer the caricature. Easier to rationalize, or something.

I don’t want to be alone, she says like a confession. He gets it.

“I can stay,” he replies, simple. So much is so complicated. Maybe this can be easy.

“I don’t think that’s–”

“–In a professional way,” he says, “we can talk about, you know. Space.”

She laughs, as though it’s a joke. He did actually mildly short circuit, thinking of spending the night with her; it’s the best he could come up with. He’s happy for her to think he’s purposefully funny, though.

“Fine,” she says, “then yes, you can stay,” and he wonders when he started to find it charming, her ability to sound like she’s doing him a favor.

They do talk, for a long time, and she doesn’t seem to want to talk about her dad so they do actually talk about work, in abstract. After a while they both start yawning, and wordlessly he lies down and she follows, turns the reading lights off as she goes. The blinds are still open, light from below casting a blueish tinge over them. She lies down and it’s awkward for a moment, and they look at each other, side by side, like children at a sleepover. She smiles, this combination of exhaustion and grief and maybe something else, something just for him, and he resists the urge to look away, all too bright, or something.

“C’mere,” he says with an ease he doesn’t usually possess, and if she hesitates when he reaches out, it’s only for a moment.

The dark is a wonderful thing, he thinks; nothing here has to feel real in the morning. He thinks that’s the only reason she allows herself this, a rare indulgence.

She doesn’t say anything, just lets herself draw closer and into his arms. Shockingly quiet, intimate in a way he feels all over. Legs tangled together, her head at his chest, his fingers finding their way into her hair in a way that makes the tension drain out of her shoulders immediately, like pulling a plug.

It feels like the easiest, most complicated, thing in the world. It renders him speechless.

Slowly, their breathing syncs, into a heady sort of rhythm he could follow the beat of forever. He could fall asleep so easily like this, but wants to make sure she does first, so wills his eyes open. He can feel her everywhere. She is so warm. She has a hand on his chest and plays with

the fabric of his t-shirt idly, like she's not even meaning to. God, he thinks, here they are, fully clothed, and it's the closest he's been to someone else in all this time. This strange combination of intimate and intense and something so much quieter and more profound; this could go one of a hundred ways and he wants them all. Wants them all with her.

He runs his fingers gently up and down her back, and when she sort of sighs into it, pleased, he slips his hand under her shirt, finds warm skin there. Feels her melt, impossibly, closer, until they could almost be one. Eventually, her breath gets slower, the slight movement of her fingers stops; he feels the weight of her, totally his to hold now. He feels the pride of a job well done. Moves, slowly, to take his glasses off, put them on the nightstand, and rearranges them slightly. Falls into a perfect, jet-lag clearing sleep with her in his arms.

He wakes early the next morning, hot Australian sun streaming in through the windows. He stretches, slow with it. It takes him a moment to realize where he is, why he's in his clothes. He blinks his eyes open, and is hit with a corner of something in his vision. Smiles, and takes the post-it note from his forehead.

Rescheduled projections meeting at 0700 AEST. Conference room 1

He laughs, slightly, sits up. Not exactly a regular morning after note; then again, it's not really a morning after. Like most things between them, it's something else entirely.

He goes back to his room, showers, leaves enough time to pick up three coffees - two for her, one for him - before the meeting. He gets a few pastries too; he didn't end up getting dinner, and she forgets to eat at the best of times. He can't imagine she's had anything since they got here.

When he opens the conference room door, it's 7:01, which to him is entirely on time, and to her may as well be four hours late. She rolls her eyes, vaguely, but softens when she sees him with breakfast.

"Thank you," she says quietly, nodding at someone on her laptop, and if she looks at him for a moment when their hands brush over a brown paper bag full of croissants, no one else has to know.

**

tokyo, japan

It doesn't happen at all like she occasionally imagined it. Not that she thought about it much, really, but a late night hypothetical happens to even the most resolute person.

It happens on a Monday night in the middle of Tokyo, which is really a Tuesday morning. She realizes, when the clock ticks over and her phone buzzes, that it also happens to be his birthday.

It is late, because it always is. It is dark, because it always is. Today, he has made her laugh in rooms that should be serious, because he always does, and now they're talking about work,

because they always do. Lingering over a diluted drink at a private table in an empty hotel bar, because it's safe. Because they always do.

It's six weeks till launch. They have a breakfast meeting with the directors of every national space organization in the morning, then an afternoon flight back to the base, then an evening operations review, then another late night and early morning, and on it goes until it's done.

Every week, every day, grows more tense. More abuzz, more grave, more nauseating, more pressing, more everything. It is a depth of emotion no one outside of their circle can understand, and it's something they all try very hard to ignore. It comes out, in some moments, and they acknowledge it and move forward. It's all they can do. It is a burden that sometimes feels like it will crush her, but she will not let it. Takes a breath, goes for a run, counts to a hundred, smokes a cigarette: moves forward. It's all she can do.

Right now, she thinks about none of that. They are just far away enough from everything for it to not have to be real for a moment.

In front of her: Grace, soft gaze, most of a bottle of wine disappeared between them. Tangible, present. Better.

"Midnight," she says, nodding to her phone, lit up on the table.

"Midnight," he repeats back, "so?"

His eyes are locked on her, body turned to her. His hand is propping up his head from where his elbow is leaning on the back of the low booth. There is something like a three drink heat between them. It's been a long time since she's felt that.

"Are you going to pretend it's not your big day?" she asks.

He laughs.

"You know, most people just say *happy birthday*," he says, and she rolls her eyes slightly to distract from the flush she feels creeping up her neck.

"Happy birthday," she concedes, and then, as though this is a different, normal life; as though she doesn't have a file in her desk drawer containing every earthly piece of information about him, "how old are you turning, anyway?"

He smiles, knowing, like he's had the same thought. He knows she knows. But he doesn't say it, just swirls his drink round in its glass and has a sip, eyes on her.

She will look back on it as one of a handful of precious nights they played pretend. Somewhere foreign, far away; somewhere they could just be two people in a bar.

"Would you believe me if I said twenty-six?" he asks.

"No," she says, "and that's a strange number to choose, anyway."

"Why?" Amused, sort of, that face he wears when he's listening to her talk.

She shrugs. “Not really young enough to do it all over, not really old enough to be smart. Just somewhere in the middle.”

“Huh,” he says, “okay, maybe–”

“Ms Stratt?” a voice interrupts from above them. They turn to look up: a concierge from the hotel. “We know you ordered this for tomorrow, but since you’re here, we thought we’d bring it to celebrate. Happy birthday, Dr Grace.”

From behind him, a waiter emerges with a big smile and an even bigger cake in hand, and places it down in front of them. She laughs, sort of in shock, at the spectacle. It’s huge, much larger than she thought, and completely absurd at a two-person table. Grace’s face lights up bright red, mortified. It makes her laugh again, and he groans, head in hands briefly.

“Thank you,” he says to the staff, who take their leave, and once they’re alone again he looks at her, says weakly: “Please tell me you weren’t going to do this in front of everyone tomorrow.”

“Of course I was,” she says, “but good to know that wasn’t necessary to embarrass you.”

He half laughs, half groans again.

“Were you going to make them sing?”

“Of course,” she says again, “but, you know, I can do the–”

“No, no, no,” he says, and for a second she thinks he might press a finger to her lips, but he seems to catch himself, “no, that’s not necessary. Plus, twenty-six, you know. Not even a big one, we can just forget about it.”

She laughs, so does he. “Well,” she says, “happy strange choice of birthday.”
They clink glasses, and suddenly it is quiet.

“Thank you,” he says quietly, then suddenly serious as he gestures to the cake, “how do you even manage to remember all of this stuff? There are like, five hundred things happening every day.”

She waves him off. “There are apps for that. And calendars. And staff,” she says, “not hard.”

He holds her gaze, like he’s not going to let her get away with it. “Still,” he says, “it’s really nice, you know. Everyone appreciates it, even if they don’t say it.”

She shrugs, a small smile. “Least you can do when you make people give up their lives for four years,” she says, and the version without the last few words goes unsaid.

There’s a beat of silence, where he looks at her with something unreadable in his eyes, then he sits up, inspecting the cake. Some monstrosity of white frosting and red writing and little glace cherries that he seems pleased with. She dislikes the brief space it creates between them. Thinks it before she can stop herself.

“You want some?” he asks, “I figure if we start eating it now, we’ll be done just in time for the next one.”

“Maybe,” she says, “but it’s bad luck not to make a wish first.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Since when have you believed in luck?”

She smiles. “Since we started betting most of our life's work on it,” she says, and he huffs a laugh in agreement.

“Fair point. No candles, though,” he says.

She takes that as a challenge, motions for him to hold that thought while she grabs her coat laying next to her; fishes around in the pocket until she finds her lighter. Wordlessly, she strikes it between them, and he hums another laugh. He leans in, then blows it out without looking at the flame.

He just looks right at her, the whole time. It makes her heartbeat feel funny, the blood in her veins flowing backwards.

“What did you wish for?” she asks.

He is so close. She can see the light from the city below in his eyes.

“You’re not meant to tell, everyone knows that,” he says, and from there, it feels inevitable.

She thinks, in flashes, to every time before; stolen little moments all around the world like this, that somehow all feel now like they were leading them to this one. She considers leaving, clearing her throat and calling it a night, but for the first time in a long time she can’t.

“Oh,” she says instead, suddenly lost for words, and he just smiles.

When he reaches out those last few inches, tucks her hair behind her ear, gently, just like he did that night in Sydney all those months ago; so tentatively she can hear his breath, she can’t help it. She closes her eyes for a moment. It happened so unexpectedly last time, so deep in the strange fog of grief. They never spoke about it again. She has to remember how it feels, to be touched by him, even just like this. She files it somewhere safe.

“This okay?” he asks, low and a little unsure. He can be so headstrong, so direct when it comes to the work. But he always takes her lead, at the end of the day, when it’s something important. It makes her head swim, thinking that here.

She swallows, looks back at him. His fingers trails at her ear, at her neck, like he doesn't want to retreat now he’s crossed the divide.

“Yes,” she says quietly, “yes. But not here. Come on.”

She has never felt time move so slow and so fast. They gather their things, sign the check, and walk over to the elevator. As they wait, he chances a glance at her and huffs a small

laugh, crosses his arms like he doesn't trust himself not to reach out to her. She smiles at the floor as the doors open, and he follows her inside. Thank god they're on the same floor; he pushes the button and they watch Tokyo disappear beneath them through the glass walls.

She looks over at him, and he is already looking at her. He hates heights, she reasons; he is always looking for a distraction from this dizzying ascent, but something about his gaze makes her forget to look down at all.

His room is first off the elevator, and suddenly she is in her head; wonders if she's misread it all terribly, if she should go. But she doesn't need to consider it for long: he takes his keycard from his pocket, and as he scans it his other hand finds her wrist, circles his thumb at her pulse and draws her gently inside with him. She has watched this man fall over his own feet more times than she can count; it is a shockingly coordinated display of intent, makes her lightheaded. Jesus.

He doesn't even put his card in the slot to turn on the lights. Just turns round as the door closes and crowds her up against it, and when he kisses her, slow and tentative but somehow so sure, so deliberate with it, she can't help it, a little sound escaping her lips that he swallows with a faint moan. She drops her coat on the floor and feels him do the same, and then his hands are in her hair, thumbs at her temples, her jaw, her face. She can feel him everywhere, his lips so good to her, tongue teasing her mouth open in a way she wants so much; too much. She kisses him back, hard, her hands trailing down his back as his slip under her shirt and find the skin of her hips.

She can't help it, arches up into him and lets him pull her close. He holds her as she tastes the grenache on his tongue, fingers at her waist, and when she presses up against him she can feel him everywhere; strong and sure, hard lines, rough face. She wraps her arms round his shoulders and pulls him closer. He pushes her gently back up against the door, hand kneading into her skin, and moans into her mouth properly, in a way that makes her gasp. She had expected him to be awkward, maybe, shier; but he's just good at this, hungry for her in a way that she feels right through her body.

After a long time of his lips on hers, his mouth slowly trails to the edge of her jaw, to her neck, and she throws her head back against the door, pulls his hair slightly as he kisses her right at her pulse. He breathes hard at that, so she does it again, and he makes a sound she likes so much she can't help but smile. He presses against her gently, teeth grazing her skin, and when she realizes he's half-hard, it takes everything in her not to wrap her legs around him and make him take her to bed.

God, she wants him so much. Can't remember the last time she's wanted something, someone, so much. It just can't happen now.

"Okay, okay," she says, pulling back as much as the door will let her. Her breath is ragged against his hair. He pulls back an inch or two in response, then like he regrets that choice immediately, comes back and rests his forehead on hers. Hands still roaming at her hips, her waist, everywhere; she has to close her eyes to make herself stop.

She doesn't have to say anything: he gets it, knows where this is going. One of a thousand things he just gets.

“I know we shouldn’t,” he says, in a way that is very different to *I don’t want to*.

“It’s just not a good idea. For now, I mean,” she says.

“I know,” he says, “I know.”

“Okay,” she says, heartbeat once again resembling something normal.

“Okay,” he says. He pulls back, steadies himself with a hand on the door next to her. He huffs a laugh, runs his fingers through her hair. She likes how much he likes doing that. It’s lighter, less heat, nonetheless something that makes her legs feel like it’s her first day on earth.

“Sorry, I just…” he says, and then he kisses her again.

She doesn’t protest. Brings a hand to his face, fingers at the back of his neck, wants him so close. Kisses him back, because she can, in this anonymous dark entryway of an anonymous dark hotel room. They stay like that for a long time, no real words exchanged, him pressing soft kisses to her lips, her cheek, the shell of her ear. A small laugh, a little moan, nothing else needed between them. Almost unbearably intimate. Safe; a license to stay here for a moment without leading to somewhere they can’t undo. She feels shaky all over.

It could be minutes, could be hours: she loses track almost entirely. But after a while she feels the exhaustion creep through her, digital clock in the corner the only light in the room telling her it’s time. She swallows, pulls him close. Kisses him deep again. One last time. Everything inside her resists that thought, but it has to be. Has to be the last time, at least until the end of all this.

“This feels a lot like goodnight,” he says against her lips, and she smiles.

One of a thousand and one things he just gets, she supposes.

“We need to sleep,” she says, and he pulls back to look at her. Adjusted to the dark, she can see his face; the lines by his eyes as he smiles at her that she can’t help but reach out and touch; the mess of his hair. Makes something pull low in her, that she did that.

“Yeah,” he says, running a thumb over her mouth in return. She shivers. “Okay, yeah. Yes.”

He stands up properly, clears his throat, suddenly a little sheepish with it all. She does the same, rakes a hand through her hair to right herself, adjusts her shirt where his hands have been at her skin, though she thinks it’ll take more than that for her to center herself again.

She picks her coat up from where she dropped it when he kissed her. She is so warm, a rarity; thinks to herself if she could just have him like this every day, she’d never need all these layers again. They look at each other for a moment as she stands back up, and they laugh for a lack of something else to do, his hand awkwardly at the back of his neck.

Okay, she thinks, enough.

“Goodnight,” she says quietly, “and happy birthday.”

She thinks he'll say goodnight and watch her leave, but as she opens the door, he leans in again, kisses her deep and hot and urgent with it, and it takes the breath from her body one last time. The sliver of corridor light paints them for a moment in stark relief. She doesn't care who sees, just kisses him back, almost desperate with it, and only pulls away once the door grows too heavy to keep a hold of.

"Goodnight," he says quietly, all gravel, and he stands leaning in the doorway with a smile on his face until she cards into her room across the hall.

When she gets into bed she buries her face in her hands, smiles for a long time. She remembers the cake forgotten down at the bar as she drifts off to sleep, untouched. Next year, she thinks.

**

berlin, germany

The rule, after Tokyo, is that they are all business. It's the right thing to do. They are weeks from launch and there is no time for daily, constant distraction.

They don't talk about it, other than a halted exchange on the flight home. A private jet, for once, not the military nausea machines he still cannot take a trip on without feeling, vaguely, like he's going to die.

It's quiet after take off, just the two of them in the cabin - she'd had a meeting, so they'd traveled to the airport separately, haven't said much since she stepped onto the plane. He clears his throat in the silence, looks out the window, then back at her. She is already looking back at him, and seems slightly embarrassed to be caught.

He likes that; smiles. She smiles back at him briefly, then seems to catch herself. Then sighs, then opens her mouth, then closes it, then opens it again before speaking. She fidgets slightly with the lip of her coffee cup.

"You know when we land," she starts, carefully, quietly, "that we have to not–"

"–I know," he says, probably too hurriedly.

"Because I–"

"–I'm with you," he says, "we can just–"

"–I'm just saying, on the base, with everyone else, we need to–"

"–I know, I get–"

"–this has to stay–"

"–I got it, totally," he says, feels his cheeks heat up in real time.

"Good," she says.

“Good,” he says, and then her phone rings, and that is that.

It’s not exactly a masterclass in communication, but it works. Rules, boundaries, are good. He tries not to feel disappointed. They have a job to do.

He has never felt a period of time pass so slowly and then all at once quite like the next month and a half. There is a volume of work unlike anything they’ve done until this point. Every minor hurdle is exacerbated and urgent, every meeting is consequential, every day requires meaningful progress. There is no time to be tired or under the weather or otherwise not at peak performance. Everyone is in sync, from a wake up alarm that echoes across the whole base in unison to an imposed curfew at night. Everything has to be perfect.

She is, of course, at the helm of it all. He has seen her pull off impossible things for the last four years; they all pale in comparison to this newly unlocked turbo mode he watches her operate at now. Half the week, she is in two countries daily and still somehow manages to ask the three best questions at every end of day download, dialled in five minutes early regardless of what timezone she’s in. The other half of the week she is with them at the base, in every meeting, relentless in how she operates. He has no idea when she sleeps, when she eats; if she’s tired, she rarely shows it, if she’s run down, she ignores it.

He has been in awe of her for a long time, the sheer force of how she operates. But it’s something else now, too. He catches her eye across a table on a tense morning and watches her smile and look away; someone mentions how nice the hotel they stayed at in Tokyo was and he watches her cheeks turn slightly pink in real time; they have dinner together late one night and when she suggests, on being offered a drink by an assistant walking by, that maybe it’s for the best that they stick to green tea, he doesn’t miss the flash of acknowledgement in her expression.

This small kernel between them, mostly ignored, but there if anyone knew where to look. He catches himself smiling as he watches her move through the world more often than he cares to admit, and can only hope everyone else is equally as awed by her to notice.

When she asks him to come to Berlin with her, it’s a late night just shy of two weeks until launch. He is overcaffeinated but somehow still tired, buried in paperwork he can’t fathom ever seeing the end of. He has his feet up on the desk in his room; when his phone buzzes he yawns, takes the welcome distraction and picks it up.

Next week I have to go and brief G20 leadership on final launch plans.

She has never, despite all his reasoning as to why they’re a nice thing to do, ever really picked up on pleasantries.

Hello to you too, he responds to make a point, then, *Where?*

Will be a couple hours north of Berlin.

Germany?

Obviously, yes.

I think there's a Berlin in Connecticut, actually.

Great. I mean the one in Germany.

When do you leave?

We leave on Tuesday.

We. He blinks.

You want me to come?

Yes.

He tries not to feel the small thrill of it, thought their traveling days might be over.

But it's launch week? he chooses, for some reason, to say.

As though she doesn't know that. He pinches the bridge of his nose, shakes his head slightly. He's so tired.

Yes. Launch will be much more difficult without their buy-in though.

Which, obviously. He doesn't need to hear it to know the tone in which that is delivered.

Why do I need to go? he sends back, then winces. *Not that I don't want to*, he follows up with, almost immediately. Just to be clear.

She doesn't reply for a couple of minutes. He sighs. Texts again. *Just curious*

Finally, ten long minutes later, his phone lights up.

Because I asked you to.

He has no further questions. Swallows, hard, for some reason feels himself blush. He says nothing, just thumbs-up reacts to stop himself saying something stupid, and puts his phone down. Tries to turn back to his laptop and concentrate on what he's doing; bites his lip to stop himself smiling.

*

A handful of days later, stepping off the plane into the cool winter air and into the back of a car, their driver turns to them and stutters something in German that makes Stratt close her eyes briefly.

"What?" Grace asks. "What's wrong?"

She sighs, readjusts her face into something more neutral.

"He has food poisoning," she says, and as if on cue, the driver flees the car without another word, sprinting across the tarmac over to the terminal. "Jesus Christ," she mutters, "well,

okay then. Good start."

He laughs, sort of charmed by how the most important meeting in the world today will likely get delayed by bad chicken. Humanity, and all that.

"We can call for another driver, right?" he says. "Can't imagine it'll take all that long."

She shakes her head. "No, no time," she says, already opening the door to get out, "I like to drive at home, anyway. Get in the front, come on."

It takes him a moment to catch up, but he follows her lead and gets out of the car, picks up the keys from the ground where their maligned driver had clearly dropped them in his last act of forward thinking.

He holds them up, looks at her over the hood as she walks round the front of the car to meet him at the driver's side. "I can drive, if you want," he says.

She raises an eyebrow. "I've never seen you drive."

"That doesn't mean I can't," he says, reasonably, he thinks, "and I've never seen you drive, either."

"You used to ride a bicycle everywhere."

"Well, yeah. It's…practical. I *can* drive," he says, a little more insistently.

"Have you ever driven in a foreign country?" she asks, tilt of her head.

"How hard can it be?" he replies, "you think I'm going to run us off the road, or something? I promise you, I can drive," he says again.

He doesn't even know why he's making this an argument, but it's sort of fun.

"Yes, of course you can," she says, in this way that sounds suspiciously placating, "but give me the keys, please."

He stares at her for a long moment, eyes narrowed. She looks right back at him, faintly amused, like she's trying not to laugh. The sun makes her hair almost glow in the crisp afternoon sun. An odd thing to notice, he thinks briefly. Thinks of her in Tokyo, her face in corridor light. God, she makes him stupid sometimes.

"Fine," he says, after a beat too long, tosses her the keys, "but I want a turn on the autobahn."

"No," she says decisively, catching them, "I drive, you can navigate, come on."

As it turns out, in the least shocking turn of events he can imagine, she's a really good driver. Hasn't been behind a wheel in close to half a decade, unfamiliar car: she doesn't miss a beat. He tries to be annoyed by it, but mostly fails. He looks out the window on the highway and watches the world go by, and thinks that it's strange how a day so big can start out so mundane, normal: car trouble and rolling hills and Google Maps.

She's smoked with increased enthusiasm over the years, but she's taken to cigarettes with a new velocity in the last couple of months, which is to say she's rarely seen for more than an hour without one now. He can see her start to fidget about halfway through their journey, and when she reaches into her coat pocket to pull out a pack, he sighs.

"You're really going to smoke in here?" he asks.

"Yes," she says, glances over at him and rolls her eyes at his expression, "don't start."

She puts a cigarette between her lips, lights up quickly before returning a hand to the wheel. He watches her eyes close briefly as she takes a drag, smoke in her lungs before she exhales, slow and easy with it.

He coughs, a little pointedly, waves his hand to make the cloud disperse faster.

"Can you crack a window, at least?" he says, and she concedes, smiles vaguely to herself as the cold air hits them, breathes that in deep too.

"God, that's good," she says almost to herself, in a way that makes him sort of flustered. He clears his throat, keeps up his illusion of mild annoyance that he assumes isn't really fooling her.

"So European," he mutters, and she laughs, gives him that one.

He deliberately looks straight ahead, because he knows she'll look good like this, one hand on the wheel, lips around a cigarette, hair in the breeze. He has an important job to do in an hour. He turns the radio up and flicks through his notes. He knows she'll be running through her own list mentally. They drive like that the rest of the way, quiet and in focus, and it's the first time he's felt a strange sort of peace in a while.

The sense of calm, predictably, is short lived.

They arrive to the full chaos of all the world's leaders gathering in one place, and he's been in a lot of big, important spaces after all this time, but never something quite like this. Tens of officials in each delegation, hundreds of other staffers and people on phones and lanyard-necked, harried-looking assistants pointing and directing their own specific microcosm of this thing. High tension, high stress, a total rabble: he bumps into about fourteen people as he moves through the crowd, murmuring an apology to each of them, and wonders how everyone else seems to know exactly where they're going.

He looks at her at one point as they stand and survey the room from the central table, a mix of expectant and vaguely overwhelmed. Needs some sort of reassurance he's not going to totally screw up everything they've been working towards. She just nods at him, squeezes his elbow quickly.

"You'll be great," she says quietly as they find their seats, side by side at the middle of the table, "it's just lots of scared people looking for answers. It's just like any other room."

In that exact moment, the President of the United States chooses to come over and greet her. It's almost funny, except for how it's completely insane.

As soon as the meeting begins, she is, of course, resplendent. So highly competent, so considered, so confident but without bravado: she is such a singular person to behold when she's like this. She is maybe not well liked, but is so incredibly well respected that everyone hangs onto her every word, nods in unison in all the right places. Something for the history books, he thinks as he watches the leaders of twenty countries taking their own personal notes as she talks. It is sometimes easy to forget, spending so much time of the in between time with her - car cigarettes, dead parents, birthday cakes - that she is for all intents and purposes the most powerful person in the world.

He is so stunned by her that he doesn't realize she's thrown to him until she clears her throat.

"Dr. Grace?" she prompts, and he blinks back into the room.

"Yep, thanks," he says, standing, microphone feedback loud for a moment before settling, "bear with me, everyone, promise to make this more interesting than your last biology class."

A generous laugh, which he was not expecting from this crowd. He takes a breath. He can do this.

He may not be her level of polish, but he does what he's good at, which is explaining complicated things to a room full of students. He thinks he gets through it fine, and he's reassured by the small smile she gives him as he sits down. They take questions for an hour or so, and then the room agrees a motion to sign a declaration of unity to the launch of the Hail Mary in a few short days. It means nothing, practically: he knows she would launch regardless if all the world's might rained down on her one way or another, but they may as well do things the easy way. She seems pleased, which is to say she nods once and adjourns the meeting.

Exhale.

They make their way towards the back doors as the world's leaders gather on the steps for a picture. She politely declines appearing in it herself: her patience for ceremony has worn particularly thin over the last six months. No more galas, no more photo ops; just the work. She shakes a number of hands, says a number of thank yous as they leave, and he stands behind her sort of awkwardly, a small wave here and there to anyone he locks eyes with.

When they make it outside, back into the cold air, it's a welcome relief. It's suddenly stunningly quiet: a few cars milling about, drivers smoking in twos and threes, four precariously balanced silver trays of muffins passing them by in the hands of a waiter.

They look at each other for a long time, and then he laughs, closes his eyes. Feels himself breathe, adrenaline right through him.

"Shit," she says, simply. He laughs again.

"Yeah," he says, "well. I guess we're doing this thing, then."

She nods, looks at the ground quickly. “I guess we are.” She looks back up. “You did great,” she says, “really.”

He shakes his head. “I read them a bunch of things they definitely didn’t understand,” he says, “you did great. That was…something else.”

She waves him off, but he sees the smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “It was fine. Did what we needed to do.”

There is a moment they lock eyes, and silently acknowledge the magnitude of it all. A small smile before he clears his throat, looks away.

“Right,” he says, “well. Think anyone found us an unpoisoned driver?” he asks, and she shakes her head.

“No, no reason, I told them not to bother. I can drive, come on.”

He doesn’t argue this time. Something about watching her secure the future of the world by afternoon tea has him inclined to give her anything he wants.

As if on cue, someone pulls their car round, and just like that they are on their way back to the city.

They ride in silence for a while, gravity of it all settling over them. Then slowly, she starts talking, breaking down the whole thing: a strange tic she’d noticed in the Italian Prime Minister, the odd way the Canadian and Brazilian delegations had avoided each other and her theory on why, the rumor she’d heard that the British leaders had gone out in Berlin the night before and were all nursing crashing hangovers. He just listens, because he likes to listen to her, and he’s so taken by her in this moment. Everything she knows, everything she does, how good she looks doing it. He has spent this whole day sort of entranced by her in a way that feels seismic. The end of something, maybe the start of something; a precipice he wants to fall from.

“Hey,” she says, after a while, waving vaguely in his face when he doesn’t respond, “was that the exit?”

He has no idea.

“No,” he says, trying to sound authoritative as he looks at his phone, angles it away from her, “no, it’s. Soon.”

This is a lie. It was definitely where she thought it was.

God, she looks so good. Can’t stop thinking about her, suddenly, wants to kiss her so badly. Wishes it wasn’t so important that they stay alive or he thinks he’d do it, right here, chance them running off the road.

“Okay. This next one?” she asks.

He doesn’t care. “Sure,” he says, “yeah, why not, take this one.”

She narrows her eyes, looks over at him.

“What has gotten into you?” she asks.

You, he wants to say, but that feels like a bad answer.

“I don’t know,” he says instead, “big day, you know.”

He expects her to be relatively unsympathetic to that, but to his surprise, she nods.

“I know. I haven’t slept in two days, I don’t think,” she says, a small rueful laugh, “probably a good thing this isn’t a long drive.”

“I honestly don’t know if I’ve slept in the last two weeks,” he says, without really meaning to, “it’s all…I don’t know. It’s all so strange.”

“Yes,” she says quietly, and suddenly the car feels so intimate. So rarely just the two of them like this, at least in daylight. “I hated it, when I found out this meeting would be here.”

He looks at her, surprised. “Why?”

“I don’t know. I kind of dread it? Coming back home. It’s not even home, really, I don’t even have an apartment here anymore. But I suppose next week I’ll start looking.”

Next week. So improbable, unthinkable, to return to before.

“I know. I don’t even remember my door code,” he says, and she laughs, “seriously, I’m going to have to ask some new neighbour to let me up. They’ll probably call the cops.”

A beat, and then: “Are you looking forward to it?” she asks, “to going back?”

His answer sort of surprises him.

“No,” he says, truthfully, “not really.”

“Why?”

He shrugs. “It’ll be nice, to sleep, to have a normal job again, I guess. But I don’t know.” He pauses, doesn’t know how to say the next part without giving up all his cards. Does it anyway. “I’ll miss a lot of things, about this.”

She looks over at him before she replies, face unreadable.

“Me too,” is all she says, quietly.

He hopes they mean the same thing. He swallows, tension thick. Has to break it.

“Plus I’m really impatient. I’m gonna go crazy, waiting twenty-five years for the class reunion, you know.”

“If we all make it that long,” she says.

Someone had once said to him that if you don't laugh you'll cry – so he laughs. She does too. For something so dark, it feels, for a moment, light.

"Right," he says, "well, here's hoping."

It's not how he wants the conversation to end, but it does, and he kicks himself silently for not making it more concrete, somehow. His heart hammers in his chest. So much he feels without meaning to; so little he knows how to say.

They make it back into the city limits a little while later, and he looks out the window, anonymous neighbourhoods, all this life around them bathed in late afternoon light. He likes seeing the mundanity of an unfamiliar place: the street signs, the bus stops, the people walking their dogs. The constants, no matter where they are.

"Have you been to Berlin before?" she asks, cutting the silence.

He shakes his head. "No, never. It's weird, to have gone to all these cities and seen nothing," he says, "I've been to Berlin and I haven't even seen the wall."

She smiles. Takes a beat before she talks, and it sounds so tentative he can't believe it's the same person who stood up those few hours ago in that room.

"Well, you should come back. I'll show it to you," she says quietly, and he can't help it, turns to her and smiles.

It feels big, suddenly, this thing between them. So full of promise. Another shot, he thinks, to get this right.

"I'd like that a lot," he says, and she nods, something warm passing across her face, "hey, could do next week. Give me a beat to remember the door code."

She smiles in return, nods.

"Yeah, well. I've got some time off, actually, so," she says faintly, and he sees the flush bloom across her cheeks as she tries and sort of fails to make that joke land. He finds it entirely endearing, so he laughs anyway. It makes him feel sort of light headed.

She goes to light another cigarette, but this time she's a little shaky with it. She places it between her lips but can't get the light, heat from the AC vents blowing it out.

"Shit," she says, and he smiles; likes it when she isn't always the calmest person on earth.

"Here," he says, leaning over and taking the lighter from her, "hands on the wheel."

She laughs, looks him in the eye quickly as she leans in to light up from behind his cupped hand protecting the flame. God, she's so close. She smiles, small and just for him, and when he leans back into his own seat again, he turns to look out the window so she doesn't see him smile, see the flush he's sure has crept up his own face in return.

She doesn't say anything, just puts her sunglasses on as they turn into orange sunset. They drive in a low hum of silence, charge between them so electric that he feels it in his brain, his blood.

"How much further?" she asks, and he glances down at his phone.

"Ten miles or so," he says, and she rolls her eyes.

"We're in Germany," she says, hitting lightly at his elbow in admonishment where it rests on the console, "use kilometers."

He rolls his eyes right back.

"Sixteen kilometers," he says obligingly, and tries not to feel the touch of her fingers in his blood.

She just laughs, sort of breathy with it, blows the last of her smoke out the window.

"Good," she says, and he feels the glow of it in his chest.

They get back to the city quickly: no traffic, everything as it should be. She chain smokes the rest of the way – points things out to him with a cigarette resting between her fingers. The tension is so thick he can't think straight; palpable, unignorable. He can't imagine having to say goodnight to her, having to go somewhere she isn't. Something about the desperate adrenaline, the panic of it being so close to the end, the wild success and insurmountable sadness of everything that is about to happen – to them, around them, because of them – it feels so stupid, suddenly, to deny all of this sitting right here.

He thinks about asking her to get dinner, asking her to get a drink, but somehow it all feels too close, too obvious, now. He wants to, so much, but doesn't want to make this harder, make it something she has to say no to. He opens and closes his mouth once, twice. Nothing comes out. And then they are at the hotel.

He's practically at her feet, but to actually do it, to make the move feels impossible somehow.

They check in and head to the elevator. The ride is silent and slightly awkward, and when they get out on the tenth floor and walk over to their rooms - next to each other, because someone always seems to book them that way - they linger for a moment.

"Well," she says.

"Yeah," he says, keying into his room and propping the door open, "uh. Do you, uh, want to call it a night?"

She blinks at him. "Oh. Okay."

"Okay."

Neither of them move. He swallows. Closes his eyes.

Sometimes, there's nothing left to do but the obvious.

"Look–" he starts.

"–This is so stupid," she murmurs in a rush under her breath at the same time, cutting him off. He looks up, surprised. She looks at him, hard, and he notices the way she glances at his lips before meeting his eyes again.

"I know," he says. He feels suspended in air, in time.

"It's four more days," she says.

He doesn't know which way she means that.

"Yes," he says, which seems safe.

"It's not that long," she says. Still unclear how she means that. He sighs, laughs for a moment. She's right there. He wants her so much.

"Look, I want whatever you want," he says, "and you're in charge, and I know this is probably a bad idea. But for what it's worth, if none of this was–"

Before he can finish that thought, she closes the gap between them and kisses him so thoroughly it takes him a long moment to work out what to do next: which is, of course, to kiss her back.

He pulls her against him quickly until they're both inside, and the door closes with a click as he pushes her gently up against the wall. He'd be lying if he said he hadn't thought about this every day since Tokyo: every second-too-long look, every time she played with her hair absentmindedly in a meeting, every late night drink they kept almost excruciatingly professional. Now, finally, he has her in his hands again, and he sighs into it, thumbs at her jaw as he tilts her head up to kiss her properly, warm and sure and good. He feels her lips part beneath his, her hands laced round the back of his neck to pull him closer, and when he bites her lip she moans into it, so pretty with it. He hums a laugh against her mouth, is so happy to have her like this again that he can't help it: wants so much of her, with her, that it takes the breath from his lungs.

She pulls back after a moment, breathing hard. Runs a hand through his hair where she's already messed it up. He closes his eyes briefly. Can tell she's going to say something, braces himself for whatever it might be.

He needn't have worried: for once, it's very simple. She puts her hands on his shoulders as she leans up to kiss him quickly before she speaks.

"Bed," is all she says, and it's not quite a question, not quite a demand. He loves it, takes a moment to work out how to speak again.

"Really?" he asks. Can't believe this is happening, some adrenaline-fuelled fever dream, maybe.

She seems half amused and faintly irritated by the question. He can't help it, has to kiss the look off her face. Just because.

"No," she says, "I just thought it was a great time to make a joke about sleeping together."

He swallows, because the intent with which she says that sends a heat pooling through him, and then he laughs, cups her jaw as he does. He loves touching her. Wants to touch her all the time. One of a thousand insane things he just thinks now, all about her.

"Okay," he says, "point taken. C'mon."

There's something so monumentally different to kissing her in a rushed haze in a hallway and kissing her with all the time in the world in bed. The latter changes everything. Here, with her, legs tangled and bodies pressed together, he's never felt so close to someone in his life. Reverent, almost, the way his hands want to feel her everywhere; the way her fingers slip under his shirt. When she tugs at it, he takes the message wordlessly, sheds it like it's nothing.

Slowly, so slow he can hear them both breathing, he sits up on his knees, and she follows, kisses him like this and breaks it only to take off her shirt in return. When she lies back down, he looks at her from above, and everything about her - hair falling perfectly on the pillow, soft skin, last evening light - leaves him speechless. He leans down for a moment, kisses her and undoes the button of her pants, her zipper. He sits back up and presses a kiss to her knee as he pulls them off, then comes back down over her, slips a hand between her legs as he kisses her cheek, her lips, her jaw.

She throws her head back slightly, and he can't help it, moans as his fingers sink into her, as she moves against him and her fingers find his hair. He thinks of every moment leading up to this, every strange joke and late night and soft glance and unbearably intimate moment, just them, and he wants her so much he can't think.

"You okay?" he asks, all breath against her as he kisses her through the question, and she smiles against his lips, grinds down against his hand.

"Yes–oh, God," she says, closes her eyes as he touches her, and he thinks he wants to hear her talk like that beneath him forever.

After a moment, he can't take it anymore; he has to feel her on his tongue. He kisses her again and trails his lips down her chest, her whole body lighting up for him as he goes, his hand coming up to linger there. He moans into her skin, takes his time, wants to remember all of this, every inch of her. When he kisses the dip of her waist and then the inside of her thigh, finally, he feels all of her tense up around him, and he has to take a deep breath to regain control; not totally mortify himself.

It's been a long time since he's done this. He hopes she doesn't notice; thinks it might've been a long time for her too. She makes the most content sounds beneath him, writhing up into his hands where they hold her hips; her fingers tight in his hair and holding him in place in return. He tries to keep the rough of his face from completely marking her up, but she isn't having it, keeps drawing him closer, insistent with it. He obliges. Whatever she wants. He

slips a hand underneath her back where she arches off the bed, thumb kneading at her skin as his tongue finds a rhythm that makes her start to shake around him. God, he loves doing this, loves doing this with her. Can't believe he gets to do this with her, after all this time.

"Oh my god," she breathes, and he can't help it, moans into her as she says it, "oh, God, keep going," she says.

One thing he's learnt over the last four years is that, usually, it's a good idea to do what she asks. He keeps going, rhythm perfect, so hot for having her like this that he moans again, and that's all it takes: he can hear her, feel her fall apart around him. He doesn't stop until she pulls harder at his hair, her laugh all breath as he comes up to kiss her.

It feels like hours, that night; inside her, with her, no more halting stops or quiet goodnights that they wish were something else. He just gets to have her like this, devastating in how good it feels to be so close, in how much he wants her. She is so sure of herself here, so sure of what she wants from him, so hot in asking for it: he gives it all to her without question. She loves to be kissed, properly and without reserve; she loves his hands on her hips; she loves when he presses his lips to her collarbone, her shoulder, her neck. So many things he learns, big and small, over the course of the night.

When he comes, the second time, she is above him, flushed and gorgeous and biting her lip to stop herself being loud. He moans - has he ever been this loud, in bed? He doesn't think so - and reaches up to pull her in tight, needs to feel her everywhere. He's so close, God; he's so close. He holds her there, bodies perfectly in sync, and something about the scent of her skin as she buries little noises into his neck and comes apart is everything he needs; he comes, hard, through his whole body, draws her in tighter and collapses into it.

"Fuck," she breathes into his ear as he sees stars, and he laughs, lets her say it for the both of them.

"Yeah," he says, and kisses her breathless, just because he can.

Later: spent, french fries in bed, two robes – an evening so full of everything he loves he feels sure it can't be real – she looks at him, considering.

"What?" he asks warily, "that's a lot of look."

"Nothing," she says with a laugh.

"Seriously," he says, "what?"

She looks away, closes her eyes for a moment before turning back, rearranging herself against the headboard to look at him.

"I was just thinking, it's a shame it took us until our last trip to do this."

So strange, to be talking about this so casually, to be doing this with her so easily. He lets out a small hum of agreement. He rearranges the way he's sitting, drops a kiss on her shoulder in the process. Just because he can.

“Not the last,” he says. His fingers find the tie of her robe, fidgeting with it before he looks up at her. “Just the last one like this. You have to show me the wall, remember.”

She swallows. Watches his hands for a moment.

“Okay,” she says quietly.

Like maybe this is something real, something tangible; not just the halcyon days of the end of this thing. It’s the first time he lets himself think that, wonders if she is doing the same.

“Plus, you know. Then I have to return the favor. You have to come back to San Francisco.”

She smiles, pleased, at that. “To see what?” she says.

She knows what she’s doing, he refuses to make it that easy.

“I don’t know,” he says, eats a fry, “you like fog?”, and it’s the best thing, hearing the way she laughs at a bad joke. He could listen to it forever.

Even later: her head on his chest, sleep almost with them, he thinks for the first time that the prospect of whatever comes after these next few days might not be so terrible after all.

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baikonur, kazahkstan

In the end, it is not to be.

The lab explodes on a grey morning three days before launch. It doesn’t take her long to realize that it’s the defining moment of her life.

He is all she can see; blurred vision as they stand, shakily, start to run, and it is the beginning of a pit in her stomach that never heals.

She looks at him as the radio stays silent, quiet desperation on both their faces. She sees him, in flashes, two days ago back in Berlin; his lovely face, his reverent gaze, his hands holding her close. It hurts so quickly that she can feel it in her body, physical: thinks, for the first time, that it might actually kill her.

It is not, of course, the last.

The red burst of the sky turns to a thick grey ash, then a terrible dust that sits in her lungs for everything that comes after. It is a reminder of what she deserves, of what it feels like to be so foolish. Sometimes she is glad to choke on it.

She has always been prepared to make sacrifices for the project - has done so, made many. Her career, her life, her future freedom. She finds it close to impossible to sacrifice him. It stares her down, and it is the closest she’s ever come to blinking.

When she looks back on it, self aggrandizing as it might be, she can't help but think of it sometimes as a sort of cosmic punishment. *Eat the apple, take the fall,* her mother used to say with a cold shrug. When she talks to God and he says nothing back for all the years that come after, that is how it feels.

She looks up at the sky and begs for something else and the sky looks back at her, inky black and unfeeling, and tells her to save the world she must give her own, and it's so cruel she feels it in her teeth.

When she sees it all years later, those terrible few days, it is just in fragments. Static flashes, as though her brain has purposefully saved her from film spools she can repeat through her mind until she's sick with it.

Flash of heat, click. Coffee through grass, click. Rubble, click. Heads in hands, hands in prayer, waiting, pleading for them to come in, click. His face, looking for an answer before she reveals the answer is, of course, him. Click.

There is no after. No quiet, understanding conversation to make it bearable. No repair. There is one terrible afternoon, there is the look in his eyes as he backs away from her, there is his warm, lifeless hand in the infirmary, and then there is nothing.

We can do it differently, she'd said to him, maybe the last thing he heard her say. She'd thought in that moment about Berlin, had heard her own voice break. Furious at herself, for allowing that. She hopes he heard it, in a way; that he knew she wasn't a total monster. That she found it hard. What a fucking understatement.

Two days later, they are gone. He is gone. There is no goodbye.

She had wanted it to go so differently. It's the worst thing, the worst way imaginable.

She watches the launch from mission control, does her requisite press and debriefs, and for the first time in four years, she does not have a to-do list waiting for her at the end of the day. It is an awful, subdued night, on the base. People drink quietly in small groups; some to remember, some to forget. She does neither: just packs her things, alone. She can think of nothing worse than spending more time here. She just wants to leave.

She is gone by daybreak. Stares out the window and wonders if she stares hard enough, she could see him somewhere in the atmosphere. Stupid.

She closes the blind. Feels the distinct, sinking feeling of knowing it is the first of so many terrible days, so many sleepless nights.

The first day of twenty-five long years, but really of forever. She never sits in a window seat again, as long as she lives.

**

unknown

It is all still so fresh to him – all the memories, all the gaps filled – when he discovers the leak. When has to make the decision.

It's a terrible thing, to feel it all come rushing back. Just as he has to come to terms with being alone for so long, once again, he remembers it all: a pain so acute he feels its cruelty through his body.

He says goodbye to Rocky right after remembering he is - was, maybe - a coward. By the time the alarms sound and wake him up weeks later, he has remembered many other things that are somehow even more painful to grasp: the tone of her laugh. The color of her eyes in soft lamp light. The taste of the skin at her neck. The sound she made when he first kissed her. A life intertwined with someone else's, spoken or not.

A life she took from him, from them both.

How he felt, with her: the furthest thing from this, from being lonely. A crushing thing to remember now, when he is so thoroughly, terrifyingly, alone.

He remembers her face in sunlight from all round the world; remembers thinking how big it felt, to do all of those things with her. He can't believe it is all lost to him. Can't believe what he had held in his hands, only to have it taken away by the very person he was holding. Even if he makes it back, even if she is still there, there is no way to get it back. Time lost, lives lived: finite resources. There is no way to get it back.

In waves, over days, he feels it all: so angry he hits the wall hard enough to need stitches, so hollowed out by loss he stops eating until he's so lightheaded he almost faints, so numb he wastes days just staring out at the black of the universe, until the vast nothingness makes him feel sick, until he has to look away lest he die from solitude.

At a point, it exhausts him so thoroughly that he has to distract himself, so he sets about doing something he's good at: teaching.

Even before the leak, he decides he'll send the beetles anyway, an insurance policy for whatever might befall him over the next four years. As entertaining as he presumes Earth will find a handful of *Big Brother: Hail Mary*-style video diaries, he figures he also might actually need to record some vaguely formal science in order for anything he sends to be useful.

So he finds a uniform that's actually his, washes his hair, makes himself look presentable - he laughs, to no one, when he realizes he's doing it, because of course who cares - and sets up a camera.

Just him, a whiteboard, a lesson. It's the first time he's felt a small sense of comfort in weeks. It's the most connected he's felt to Earth since he woke up.

It doesn't take long for him to realize he is thinking only of her as he records.

How strange, to feel such a profound sense of loss; everything she took from him, yet to still think of her, and of Earth, so lovingly as he talks. How awful, to have been betrayed by the person he held closer than anyone else; how painful to know she was – rationally, at least –

right. What a gift to be able to tell her of their improbable salvation from the other side of the universe.

She's eleven light years away and yet he still finds himself thinking of how to explain something in a way that will make her laugh, calling back to things he knows - hopes - she'll remember. He hates it, that he can't rationalize her into someone to be cold to, withholding from. Part of him wants to be, to do that to her. To twist the knife right back, to make it even in some small way. But he can't do it. Even if she never lost a night of sleep over it, he can't bear the thought of her last memory of him being unfeeling. He wouldn't know how to do it if he tried.

He doesn't hate her: she did the right thing. He hates her: she did it to him. None of it satisfying, none of it rational or clear or something to hold onto. It just is; terrible and raw and profound.

Human, he thinks. Unfailingly, unmistakably, human.

And then the alarms sound.

A whole new dimension to his grief; this unspeakable thing, emerges.

Days later, once his mind is made up - after the disbelief, after the horror, after the agony of choice - he starts addressing her directly. Not intimately, nothing private: he knows anything he sends back will become foundational pieces of human history, and he can't bear the thought of his soul on display for everyone to see. The thought of one person knowing him like that is enough. But he talks to her anyway, and hopes she sees the rest, everything he means and wants to say but can't, in his eyes.

Days later, three beetles are packed and ready to fly.

He is about to seal the fourth when he finally works out what he wants to send her.

He goes back to the dormitory and finds it, the little version of himself Rocky had made all those weeks ago, before they had one common word between them. He grabs it, and then after a moment's hesitation, wraps it in a t-shirt, *I Had Potential*. If anyone were to ask, it's just to protect everything else in the beetle from the strength of the xenonite. Or to protect the xenonite from everything else in the beetle. Or something. She will know it's for her. Has to know it's for her.

He makes his way back to the launch compartment, tucks this last piece of cargo into the final beetle - Paul, obviously, the best one - and seals it up.

He blinks, quickly, a few times. They look so impossibly small to be carrying everything he needs them to convey. He touches them, his full hand on each of them, deliberate. Tries to imprint the importance of their journey onto them.

"Okay," he says, "time-go."

And then, there is nothing else to do but say goodbye.

He watches them until they become four anonymous dots in space. His last contact with home, forever. Feels a tear roll down his cheek - all he does in space is cry, he thinks, if there were anyone around to ask he'd make a joke and call it altitude sickness, but there isn't - and wipes it away.

He takes a deep breath and says a silent eulogy for his earthly life, because there is no one else to do it for him.

The last remnants of him are gone, now starting their homeward journey. He has no choice but to trust they'll make it: they must make it. Too much to bear if it's all for nothing; he can't think about it. Trusts the science, trusts the luck. They will make it. It will not have been in vain.

Crushing, the loneliness of this moment, heavy on his chest even with no gravity. And that, there, is the part of this that isn't about saving planets and species and lives, isn't about the weight of two worlds: it is just about him. When he finds Rocky - and he will find him, and he will be alive - he will never feel like this again. Earth, on the other hand: he has a terrible vision of making the journey and feeling, on arrival, alone; he world aged around him. He can't bear the thought.

Selfish, maybe, to think about himself in all of this, but he thinks just maybe he's earnt it.

He clears his throat, wipes at his eyes, and starts plotting his course.

Not just the right decision, but also the one he realizes he wants to make.

He sleeps better that night than he has in days. For the first time since he woke up on the Hail Mary, he dreams of her.

They are in a car, and she is driving, and she is smoking a cigarette and laughing in profile. She is so beautiful, and the hills behind her are so green, and behind them is the place they live and the bar they go to and the school he teaches at. They have all the time in the world, and the road never ends, and there is never anything in front of them. Just endless sky, and infinite crisp air, and afternoon light that catches her hair.

The sun is so warm, just for them: bright and defiant.

A small gift from another life, he thinks; another life that he was so close to living.

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classified, pacific ocean

Twenty-six years is a lifetime. She does not move through it with grace.

At the three day mark, she disconnects her phone and goes to bed for a long, long time.

At the three week mark, she realizes she wants to talk to someone, and that the only person she can think to call is him. It is the first time she feels her breath stolen, quick and perfect. It is not the last.

At the three month mark, she sees a display of American candy at the grocery store and thinks that grief might be the thing that kills her, right here in aisle seven. She leaves without buying anything, which is fine, because she can't eat anyway.

At the one year mark, she drinks a handle of gin in two days and wonders for the first time - seriously, existentially, factually - if she can actually do this, if she can bear this excruciating weight for the rest of her life. It is just as pressing as the first day, maybe worse. She thinks, with a certain rising panic, that there might only be one way to free herself from it.

At the two year mark it is all so heavy, so dark, that when she is sent to prison it is a welcome distraction: the sharp relief of a knowable, physical pain.

There is nothing to do but vanish into a gruelling monotony. If she eats very sparingly and takes the right pills and smokes a handful of cigarettes a day, she can switch almost all of it off: every feeling, every sense of being present, every dream. It feels so good, to disappear. She loses weeks at a time, sometimes, and it feels like such a victory. Her sentence slides by underneath her and on the odd day she feels it – when she wakes up in a sweat, when she forgets her meds and dreams of the boat and Berlin and Baikonur – she walks the yard until she feels lightheaded, until she can fall back into nothing.

At the twelve year mark, she gets out.

She remembers that day, the sun so hot and bright in her eyes she wonders if they'd gotten it all wrong somehow. She remembers standing there and understanding in real time that the vastness of the world around her was more walled than any cell; so claustrophobic, an inescapable prison of its own.

Somehow she serves her sentence and it's still not even halfway. Twenty-six years is a lifetime.

At the thirteen year mark, things start to get very bad. Right on schedule. It's good timing for her to be free: she can get right back to work. Not officially, of course, she is still incredibly out of favor, but her connections remain. They come to her surreptitiously, she gives them her advice, her thoughts; moves the needle from behind the curtain. They invite her to a reception every year on the anniversary of the Hail Mary's launch, which of course she declines. She watches the fifteenth anniversary on TV - a documentary, all the footage, all the crew interviews. Aside from Grace, of course, the hero who had no time for any of that; who to the outside world was so furiously preparing to save the world he couldn't be seen by any press. She sees herself in the news clips, dead behind the eyes, tremor in her hands. It makes her so unspeakably sad she has to turn it off.

She stops marking time in years, starts marking it in decline instead. Number of frozen seas, number of famines, number of deaths. Their little extinction event, a nasty teenager all grown up.

It grows cold, fast, then colder. She has always hated the cold. God's little punishment, to freeze her out and make her sacrifice the last person who ever made her warm.

At the twenty year mark, when the world is in desperate need of unity, they finally turn to her and beg, and she says yes because people deserve to be saved. She does not accept the pardon they offer her, because fuck them and their guilty consciences. If she has to live with hers, they can live with theirs too. They should pay a fraction of the cost she has been forced to bear.

There is, of course, not much that can be done. It's not like last time; wealth and ceremony and belief. It's scrappy, and ugly, and immediate in its existentialism. People are gripped with fear in a way that bleeds through everything, red wine into linen.

Other than wait - which is really most of what they can do - she does the only other thing that she knows works. She selects a team, someone from everywhere; stakes for everyone, and they land on the US government's last available icebreaker just before the launch of the Hail Mary turns twenty-one.

And yes, they develop rationing systems, and they broker deals between the countries that will listen, and they encourage unity. Some of it helps, most of it doesn't. Really, they wait. They look to the sky and beg the speed of light to change, for their prayers to work, for a sign of life.

They look to the sky and wait to be saved.

Five long years later, on an unsuspecting Wednesday, she is walking back from breakfast when an American general finds her in the hall outside her quarters, on her way to a meeting.

"Ma'am," he says, "do you have a moment?"

"Yes," she says, "go on."

"I think we should step into a room," he says, and she rolls her eyes. The dramatics. Everyone here has the same clearance, there are no secrets.

"I have a meeting. What do you need, General?"

He clears his throat. "Ma'am, we're confirming now– retrieving everything now. But, uh. We think," he pauses, lowers his voice, "we think we have splashdown."

She feels the cells in her blood freeze. Forces herself to hold it together. He clears his throat again, uncomfortable in her stare.

"Splashdown, ma'am. From the Hail–"

"I know," she says quickly. To this day, she doesn't like to hear its name spoken by strangers. "Okay. Okay. Everything comes direct to me, please, no one else should know this yet. Small circle. I want to review first. We go from there."

He nods, gets on his way. Which is good, because she thinks she has about ten seconds until her legs give out.

She goes into her room and sinks to the floor, leant up against the bed. All of it - every terrible night, every interminable day, ten years in prison, all these endless years in purgatory - are culminating in this moment. Her whole life. Earth's whole life, God willing: it might just be about to become worth it.

She thinks about how she's waited twenty-six years to hear those three words, and they still render her completely, totally frozen in time.

She stays there, her head in her hands, until there is a knock at her door: arrival confirmed, materials incoming, to be delivered only to her up on the bridge. Then there is news of the second, the third, the fourth. Perfectly in unison, just as they intended. She cannot believe this is happening. That it worked - would they have sent them back, if they had failed? She breathes, forces herself to breathe. Only one way to find out.

She looks at herself in the mirror, splashes cold water on her face. She can see herself there: who she was before, the person who got this done. For one day, at least, she can find it in herself to be her again.

In the end, twenty-six years culminates in her standing on her own with a laptop and a thumb drive. Not exactly how she'd envisioned it, but what else could it have been. The rest of the materials are on their way, but they got this to her fastest. She plugs the drive in, waits, and there in her hands are a handful of video files, numbered in order.

There is only one thing for it. She presses play.

When the first frame flashes up - his face, and God, he made it there alive, and he looks okay, he looks well - she feels everything. Everything. The breath leaves her lungs, and it does not return for a long time.

She does not cry, she does not pore over it, she does not scrutinize every movement of his face, every joke, every tilt of his head. That will all come later; late nights on replay, over and over. For now, she just lets herself sink into it.

Grace; astronaut, pilot, engineer, scientist. Grace, the protagonist in humanity's most incredible story: meeting intelligent life at the edge of the universe, saving both their planets, befriending an alien he has learnt to communicate with using nothing but his brain, that she'd always loved so much, and two taped together laptops. She watches them laugh together - there is no one she can imagine being more predisposed to charming an alien species than Grace - and she watches them learn, watches them solve this unsolvable problem with so much life and joy and connection, even when it is terrible. She is so moved by it she can hardly stand it. Impossible, impossible; she pinches herself more than once, and still can't be sure that this is all real.

Grace, in the end, their one and only savior. Her mind goes so dark when he recalls how he woke up alone. She has to hit pause at that, say a silent prayer for the bravest people she knew, who sacrificed themselves and never came to. Has to steady herself for so many minutes she loses track of time. Grace, alone; maybe the only thing worse than what she did to him is the thought of him waking up there alone. By her design, no memory, no training, nothing. Jesus. She puts her head in her hands for a long moment, then presses on. Can't help

but smile at the start of the next tape, whiplash: him by a microscope, showing the slide to the camera. Grace, solving problems almost in real time as he starts recording more and more of the journey, brow furrowed as he looks over his glasses.

All for her to watch, hours of it, almost leisurely in what they show: meals, conversations, discoveries, bickering, tangents, nothings. She can almost feel it. Like looking at a past life through museum glass. Their life, all those years ago.

His face, so remarkably untouched by all the earthly time she has lived, just as she remembers him: so young, so clever, so unaware of his own charm. She sees him there, just the same but also so incredibly changed, in uniform as he explains it all, and it's the most hope she's felt since she ate french fries with him in a hotel robe.

She wipes at her eyes roughly as that thought makes them blur. God.

"Ma'am?

She is interrupted by the same general. He looks at her, kind eyes, and smiles. She tries to set her face into something neutral. Fails, probably, and really, who cares anymore.

"Yes?" she says.

"Everything else is being tested, but this had your name on it. I wanted to bring it to you first," he says, and when she looks at his hand it is a rolled up blue t-shirt, something inside.

She recognizes it immediately.

"Thank you," she says quietly; takes it from him as he leaves.

She swallows as she unravels it, can't help but laugh in disbelief. She remembers telling the team to pack all his stupid t-shirts, remembers thinking wildly that maybe it would help him. And now here it is: so many years later, holding the little figurine he has just shown her on tape.

She can't even begin to process it: so just holds it in her hand, swallows hard. Holds it tighter.

He smiles when he says it, towards the end, when he starts somehow talking directly to her: *at least I don't have to hear you say I told you so*. It is so full of warmth that she feels a lump rise in her throat, has to bite her thumbnail to stop herself from reacting here, in front of strangers on the bridge. She thinks, for a moment, that maybe it would be easier if he hated her. If he were cold, distant in these tapes. She reaches out, touches his face on the screen, can't help herself. It might be easier if he hated her, yes. She is so glad, at least in these small moments that he chose to send her, that maybe he doesn't. At least not totally.

It's devastating, of course, to see how it plays out. To see him choose, after everything, not to use his unbelievable lifeline. She feels it claw at her throat as he explains it; the leak, the fuel, what it would mean for him to continue on his journey and leave Erid to die.

She knows, even before he seems to, that he will not allow that to happen. Someone who saved him when everyone else - her, specifically - did not, and a planet full of life depends on

it: he won't let them die.

She would know.

An impossible choice with only one right answer becomes the last thing they will ever share.

She will find time to let that take her legs out later. For now, there is a planet to save.

Two, she supposes. She wonders if he is doing the same thing, eleven light years away. It fills her with something like comfort, so she decides to believe it.

For a moment, before everything that will happen next swallows her up, she looks out over what's left of the Pacific Ocean. Allows herself a truly deep breath, and somehow it feels like her first one in twenty-six years.

It is a grey day. Most of them are, now. The sky blends to broken ice through the fog. He'd probably love it, actually. When she dreams of him now, it is often of those first few days in California, when they were strangers, when she could never have imagined everything that was to come. She used to dream of the terrible things: vivid, violent dreams of the worst thing she has ever done. But now, when he comes to her, it is in the quiet San Francisco mist: eating a cup of noodles, laughing with people she'd never even seen crack a smile, talking at a velocity she'd never encountered before. Eyes bright, everything so new, so full of hope in that first makeshift lab.

She holds his little xenonite figurine's hand in her own, and she wonders, for a second, if he can feel it. An impossible thing, she thinks. She squeezes it anyway.

Okay. She can do this.

"Let's begin," she says. And they do.

**

End Notes

thank u for reading this extremely long and self indulgent thing!!!!!

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